

GOETHE'S CONFESSION OF FAITH.

BY THE EDITOR.

WE meet frequently with the statement that Goethe's confession of faith is contained in Faust's reply to Margaret.¹ The passage is most beautiful and the words are so much like music as to deserve to be called a sonata of thought. Rhymes prevail in the beginning but are soon discarded while the verses proceed more and more in a dithyrambic style simply in obedience to the general principle of euphony.

In contrast to the common view I wish here to protest against the traditional interpretation. Faust's reply to Margaret is not intended to be a confession of faith, neither of Faust nor of Goethe himself. We must understand the scene according to the situation. Margaret in her anxiety about the soul of her dearly beloved examines her friend as to his belief in God, and he dodges the question, because he is unwilling to shock her with his unbelief. A philosophical explanation would be out of place with this sweet, but simple-minded girl, and so he resorts to the stratagem of answering her question in phrases. His words are carefully selected so as to make the same impression upon her that she receives from the sermons at church, while in fact his meaning is the very opposite to the doctrines preached by the priest. His tone, his fervor, and his style are about the same as a devout pulpiteer might use, but the sense is different.

If we read the scene with this interpretation in mind, we will readily understand that Faust's reply to Margaret can not, and should not, be regarded as Goethe's confession of faith. Here is the scene in Bayard Taylor's excellent translation:

MARGARET.

"Believest thou in God?"

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FAUST.

"My darling, who shall dare

'I believe in God!' to say?"

¹ In the sixteenth scene of the first part of "Faust."

Ask priest or sage the answer to declare,
And it will seem a mocking play,
A sarcasm on the asker.

MARGARET.

"Then thou believest not!

FAUST.

"Hear me not falsely, sweetest countenance!
Who dare express Him?
And who profess Him?
Saying: I believe in Him!
Who, feeling, seeing,
Deny His being,
Saying: I believe Him not!
The All-enfolding,
The All-upholding,
Folds and upholds He not
Thee, me, Himself?
Arches there not the sky above us?
Lies not beneath us firm the earth?
And rise not, on us shining,
Friendly, the everlasting stars?
Look I not, eye to eye, on thee,
And feel'st not, thronging
To head and heart, the force,
Still weaving its eternal secret,
Invisible, visible, round thy life?
Vast as it is, fill with that force thy heart,
And when thou in the feeling wholly blessed art,
Call it, then, what thou wilt,—
Call it Bliss! Heart! Love! God!
I have no name to give it!
Feeling is all in all:
The Name is sound and smoke,
Obscuring Heaven's clear glow.

MARGARET.

"All that is fine and good, to hear it so:
Much the same way the preacher spoke,
Only with slightly different phrases.

FAUST.

"The same thing, in all places,
All hearts that beat beneath the heavenly day—
Each in its language—say;
Then why not I, in mine, as well?"

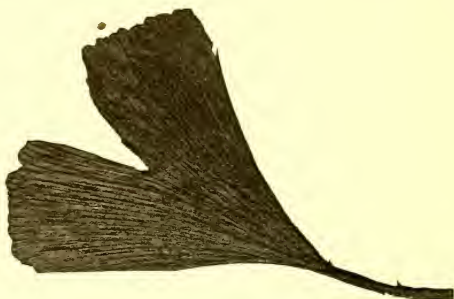
Faust's declaration as to his belief in God consists of phrases and of phrases only. It does not contain thoughts but displays a

wonderful iridescence of sentiment, calculated to intoxicate the heart and capture the hearer's assent.

But where can we find Goethe's true confession of faith?

We have several poems that characterize his world-conception, but none of them is complete in itself.

Goethe loved to represent his own views in contrasts, taking up first one standpoint and meeting it by its contrary so as to avoid a one-sided partisan conception. The poet might truly have applied Faust's words to himself, "Two souls, alas! dwell in my breast." How clearly Goethe was conscious of this contrast within his own nature appears from a later poem addressed to the two-lobed leaf



LEAF FROM GOETHE'S GINGO TREE.

Reproduced from a pressed leaf sent to the author as a souvenir from Weimar by Professor Hatfield.

of an Oriental tree called *Gingo Biloba*, which he had planted in his Garden at Weimar. Goethe says:

"Leaf of Eastern tree transplanted
Here into my garden's field,
Hast me secret meaning granted,
Which adepts delight will yield.

"Dieses Baums Blatt, der von Osten
Meinem Garten anvertraut,
Gibt geheimen Sinn zu kosten,
Wie's den Wissenden erbaut.

"Art thou one—one living being
Now divided into two?
Art thou two, who joined agreeing
And in one united grew?

"Ist es Ein lebendig Wesen,
Das sich in sich selbst getrennt?
Sind es zwei, die sich erlesen,
Dass man sie als Eines kennt?

"To this question, pondered duly,
Have I found the right reply:
In my poems you see truly
Twofold and yet one am I."

"Solche Frage zu erwidern,
Fand ich wohl den rechten Sinn;
Fühlst du nicht an meinen Liedern,
Dass ich eins und doppelt bin?"

—Tr. by P. C.

If Goethe ever wrote a confession of his faith it should be sought in the poem entitled "Prometheus," but even this slogan of the rebel, written in a mood of storm and stress, expresses only the religion of one of Goethe's souls. It is one-sided and incomplete unless it be contrasted with some other poem such as "Ganymede," "The Limitations of Mankind," or "The Divine."

The young Goethe passed through the period of revolution, called *Sturm und Drang*.² He was thrilled with the revolutionary spirit of titanic genius. He longed for independence and dared to assert himself in the face of any authority. But the old Goethe had calmed down, and was perfectly aware of the necessity of order, of law, of steady and peaceful conditions in life. This contrast between the young and the older Goethe does not characterize successive periods but is simultaneous. The titanic nature predominates in his youth and a conservative spirit in his maturer years, but they are both integral parts of his being throughout the whole of his life. Both are reflected in his poetry and both permeate his religion and philosophy.

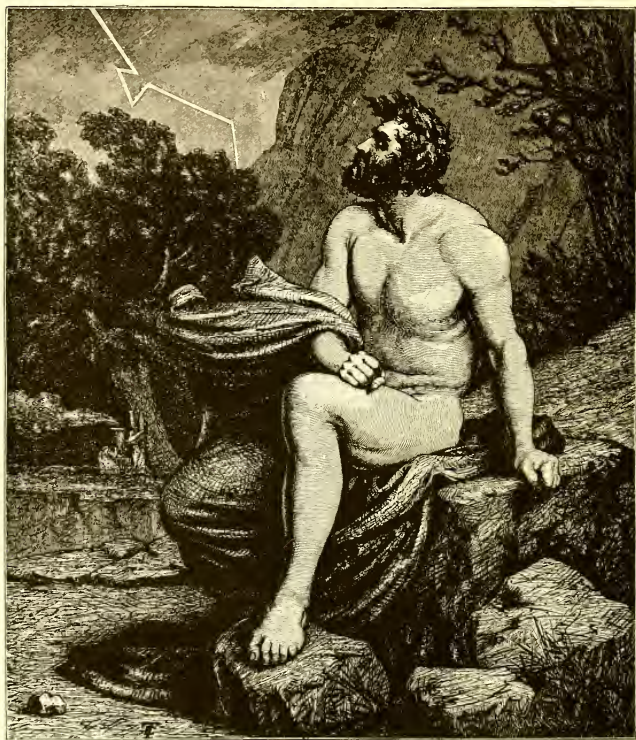
Goethe wrote "Prometheus" at the end of the year 1774, in a period of his life when he isolated himself from others and so felt sympathy with the Titan who in separation from the gods constructed in his lonely workshop a world of his own. He communicated the poem to his friend Jacobi, and Jacobi without revealing its authorship, showed it to Lessing in 1780, who was so much pleased with it that he declared the standpoint taken in Prometheus to be his own.

The poet gives the following account of his own intentions:

"The fable of Prometheus began to stir within me. I cut the garment of the old Titan to suit my stature, and without further delay began to write a drama of the strained relations in which Prometheus had become estranged from Zeus and the other gods. He now molded men with his own hand, had them endowed with life by the favor of Minerva, and founded a third dynasty. And indeed the governing gods had good reason to complain since they might be looked upon as occupying an illegitimate place between Titans and men. Part of this work is the monologue, which as a sep-

² The traditional translation of this phrase, which is "the period of storm and stress," is not quite correct. The meaning of the German words *Sturm-und Drang-Periode* does not denote an external condition, but a subjective and active attitude of a certain class of German poets. They were trying to take the heavens by storm and applied themselves with bold vigor. *Sturm* in this connection does not mean "a storm" but "a storming," and *Drang* "a pressing forward; violent endeavor; a wild aspiration."

arate poem has made some stir in German literature, because by it Lessing was prompted to explain several important points in thought and sentiment in contrast to Jacobi. It became a fuse for an explosion which revealed the most intimate thoughts of worthy men and



PROMETHEUS.

drove them to the fore, revealing conditions which unconsciously were slumbering in the hearts of those members of our society who were otherwise most enlightened."

The poem reads as follows :

"Zeus, cover thou thy heaven
 With cloudy mist,
 And like a boy
 That chops off thistles,
 Exercise thy strength
 On oaks and mountain peaks.
 Yet must thou leave me
 The earth where standeth
 My hut, which was not built by thee;
 In it my hearth,
 Whose cheerful flame
 Evokes thy envy.

"Naught do I know more wretched
 In all the world, than you, ye gods,
 So miserably
 With all your majesty,
 Ye eke out your existence
 By sacrifice
 And mumbled prayer.
 In sooth, ye'd starve
 Were not children and beggars
 Your hope-deluded dupes.

"When still a child I was
 And knew not where to turn,
 Heavenward strayed mine eye
 To the sun, as if above there were
 An ear listening to my complaint,
 A heart like mine
 Feeling the dint of pity
 For a troubled soul.

"Who helped me
 Against the Titans' insolence?
 Who rescued me from death,
 From slavery?
 Didst not thyself accomplish all,
 O holy, glowing heart,
 Deluded in thy youthful goodness,
 Still glowing gratitude
 Unto the slumbering god above?

"Shall I yet honor thee? For what?
 Didst thou ever assuage the pangs
 Of the sorrow-laden?
 Has not my manhood been wrought
 in the forge
 Of omnipotent Time
 And of Fate,
 My masters and thine?

"Thinkest thou
 That I should hate life
 And fly into deserts,
 Because not all
 My blossoming dreams
 Riped into fruit?

"Here am I, moulding men
 After my image,
 A race like mine
 To suffer, to weep,
 And to enjoy life;—
 And to disdain thee
 As I do."

—*Tr. by P. C.*

The poem "Ganymede" represents Goethe's devotion which, being expressed in the religious sentiment of ancient Greece, finds expression in a prayer of the cup-bearer of Zeus. It reads as follows:

"In glitter of morning
 Thou glowest around me,
 Spring, thou beloved!
 With thousand-fold of passionate
 raptures
 All my heart thrills
 To the touch divine
 Of thine ardor undying.
 Ambrosial Beauty!

"Oh! that I might enfold
 Thee in this arm!

"Alas! on thy bosom
 Rest I, and languish,
 And thy flowers and thy grass
 Are pressed to my heart.
 Thou coolest the burning
 Thirst of my bosom,

Morning-wind exquisite!
Softly the nightingale
Calls to me out of the misty vale.
I come! I am coming!

"Whither? Ah! whither?
Up! up the effort!
The clouds they are floating

Downwards, the white clouds
Bow down to the longing of love.
To me! Me!
In your lap float me
Aloft
Embraced and embracing!
Aloft to thy bosom,
All'loving Father!"

—*Tr. by William Gibson.*

It was Goethe's intention to offset "Prometheus" by "Ganymede," but it seems to us that he succeeded better in describing religious devotion in two others of his dithyrambic poems, entitled "The Limitations of Mankind," and "The Divine."

In all these poems, as well as in "Prometheus," Goethe speaks as a believer in the Greek world-conception, and so the divine order is conceived as a polytheistic monotheism, the divine beings represented by the celestials,—“the higher beings whom we revere,” and among whom Zeus is the omnipotent, all-embracing father. The poem "The Divine" reads as follows:

"Man must be noble
Helpful and good!
For this alone
Distinguisheth him
From all things
Within our ken.

"Hail to the unknown
Higher presences
Whom we divine:
May man be like them,
And his conduct teach us
To meet them in faith.

"Nature around us
Is without feeling:
The sun sheds his light
O'er the good and the evil;
The moon and the stars shine
Upon the guilty
As well as the upright.

"Storms and torrents,
Hail and thunder,
Roar their course
Seizing and taking
All things before them,
One after another.

"Thus also Fortune
Gropes 'mid the crowd,
Now seizing the schoolboy's
Curly innocence,
Now, too, the gray crown
Of aged guilt.

"Eternal and iron-clad
Are nature's great laws
By which all things
Must run and complete
The course of existence.

"But man can accomplish,—
Man alone,—the impossible;
He discriminates,
Chooses and judges;
To the fleeting moment
He giveth duration.

"His alone it is,
To reward the good,
To punish the wicked,
To save and to rescue,
To dispose with foresight
The erring, the straying.

"And we revere
The great immortals
As if they were men,
Doing in great things
What in the lesser
The best one of mortals
Does or would fain do.

"Let the noble man
Be helpful and good,
Untiringly do
What is useful and just!
Be an example
Of those presences
Whom we divine."

—*Tr. by P. C.*

Goethe was by nature pious. He declared that "only religious men can be creative,"³ and so it was natural that he gave repeated expression to his faith. The same sentiment of pious submission to the Divine, to God, to Father Zeus, or whatever we may call the Divinity that sways the fate of the world, is also set forth in "The Limitations of Mankind," written in 1781, which reads as follows.

"When the primeval
Heavenly Father
With hand indifferent
Out of dark-rolling clouds
Scatters hot lightnings
Over the earth,
Kiss I the lowest
Hem of His garment,
Kneeling before Him
In childlike trust.

"For with the gods
No mortal may ever
Himself compare.
Should he be lifted
Up, till he touches
The stars with his forehead,
No resting-place findeth
He for his feet,
Becoming a plaything
Of clouds and winds.

"Stands he with strong-knit
Marrowy bone

On the firmly founded
Enduring Earth,
Not high enough
Does he reach,
Merely to measure,
With oaks or vines.

"What distinguisheth
Celestials from mortals?
There are many billows
Before them rolling,
A stream unending:
We rise with a billow,
Collapse with a billow,
And we are gone.

"A little ring
Encircles our life,
And on it are linked
Generations to come,
In the infinite chain
Of their existence."

—*Tr. by P. C.*

The contrast between these two kinds of poems, on the one hand "Prometheus" and on the other hand "Ganymede," "The Divine" and "The Limitations of Mankind," is almost a contradiction. Prometheus is the rebel who defies Zeus, while the other poems exhibit piety, reverence, devotion for and love of the divine, whether gods, angels or saints, having Zeus or God as the loving All-Father.

³ In a letter addressed to Riemer, of March 26, 1840.

Goethe is convinced that both standpoints are justifiable and that both are needed in the development of mankind. Man is sometimes obliged to rebel against the conditions that would dwarf him and hinder the growth of his individuality; he must be a fighter even against the gods, and in his struggle he must prove strong and unyielding, hard and unmovable, and yet such a disposition should not be a permanent trait of his character. The humanity of man teaches him to be tender and pliable, to be full of concession and compromise. It may be difficult to combine these two opposite qualities, but it is certain that in order to be human and humane man stands in need of both. Man must be courageous and warlike and at the same time kind-hearted and a peace-maker. He must be animated with the spirit of independence, and yet be possessed of reverence and regard for order. He must be a doubter and yet have faith. He must be a Titan, and rebel, an iconoclast, may be an atheist, and yet he must be devout and filled with a love of God.

There was something of the nature of both Ganymede and Prometheus in Goethe.